MERCURIAL

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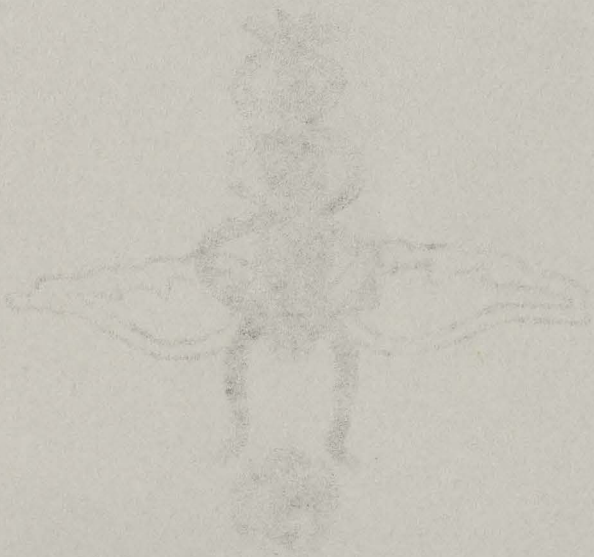

MERCURIAL

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Dedication:

We would like to thank Professor Wagner and Professor Anastas for helping us get the first issue off the ground, and Katie Ashley for printing this issue out on such short notice. We would also like to thank all of our contributors. This would not have been possible without them.

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Cover Art by Melanie Denzer

O.K.

Benjamin Kozlowski

"I'm a therapist," he told the girl at the bar.

"Really!" She exclaimed. "This must be my lucky day!"

"Why is that?" The therapist asked. More than anything else, he wanted to sleep with the girl tonight.

"Because my husband needs a therapist."

"Oh," he replied, but felt better about it afterwards. "That's O.K."

"Yeah, I told him not to worry so much about it, that everything was going to be O.K, but he was really scared to go out in public and see someone," she told him. Her face lost some of its glow.

"Yeah, that happens when a person needs to see a therapist," he told her.

Her face brightened. "That's O.K. He looked really funny with his face all screwed up like that. He even said weird stuff like 'I can't stand to look at you,' and 'You don't know what it's like, to be free!'"

"Yeah," he said, looking at her breasts instead of her face. "That's how you know they need a therapist," he joked.

She laughed. "And I knew what the law said, so I told him that I wouldn't let him stay in the house until he'd seen one. He said I had no right to be in his house, so I threw him out. He screamed and clawed at the door, but I closed the steel covering and locked him out. It kinda bothered me at first, but I felt better about it afterwards."

"That's how you know you don't need a therapist!" He told her, laughing. She laughed, too and her breasts bobbed up and down as she did. The whole bar caught the contagious laughter and it took some time before anyone could speak again.

"So, you wanna sleep with me tonight?" The girl asked.

"What about your husband?" The therapist replied reflexively, then thought better of it.

"He still isn't back yet," she admitted a little morosely, then brightened. "But that's O.K. I figured I'd find somebody at the bar."

"Good for you," the therapist told her breasts.

"Yeah. I didn't feel right about it at first-"

"-But you felt better about it afterwards," the therapist joined in with her. Both people laughed. The bartender laughed. The patrons on stools laughed. The men and women sitting at tables laughed. Somebody ordered a round of drinks, and the bartender broke a glass trying to rummage through the bottles while groping one of the other girls at the bar.

"That was damn funny!" The therapist exclaimed.

She laughed gaily. "Yeah."

They were silent for a moment, and felt a little awkward, but the sensation passed.

"Let me finish my drink and we can go to my apartment," he told her.

She felt a little disappointed, but she felt better immediately. "That's O.K," she said, and ordered another drink.

They were silent again, but the therapist decided to make conversation before the awkwardness could arrive.

"So, did your husband find a therapist?" he asked.

"I don't know, he never came home," she repeated, a little quietly. "But that's O.K."

"Oh, yeah," he said reflectively. "Hey, what does he look like? Maybe I saw him today!"

"Yeah!" she exclaimed, as though starting a new game. "Let's see..." she pursed her lips and the creases of her forehead deepened, then the tension vanished completely. "I can't remember," she said gaily.

"That's O.K," he told her. "Maybe I can guess. Was he tall with dark brown hair and hazel eyes?"

"No."

"How about short and fat with a little toupee?"

"No."

"Muscular with blond hair?"

"No."

"Too bad," he told her. She laughed. "What about - let's see... medium-tall, black crew-cut, and green eyes."

She paused, then her face lit up. "That's him!"

"I remember him," the therapist told her. "He had an accident at work, right?"

"I don't think so," she told him, "but that's O.K. It might be him."

"One of his co-workers didn't fix the insulation on the wires, right?"

"Oh, yeah." She giggled. "He said the guy kept getting distracted because it was snowing outside."

"Right," the therapist laughed. He had been watching the snow during most of the day today. "He's lucky he wasn't killed grabbing those wires!"

"Yeah, really!" She laughed. "He said he thought it was a good idea at the time."

"How stupid can people get?" The therapist joked.

"Yeah, really!" She said again.

The therapist ordered another drink. "Anyway, I told him that

the implant had probably been fried by the electric current."

"Implant?"

"Yeah, the O.K. implant."

"O.K."

"I think it stands for somebody's name – Owen Kellogg or Orson Keller or something," he explained.

"No, I meant, O.K, go on with your story."

"Oh," he said sheepishly, but felt better immediately.

"That's O.K," she told him.

"Yeah. So I told him it had probably been fried and I shot him with the antidote."

"Wow, it's that easy?" She asked incredulously.

'Yeah, just point and pull the trigger, then drag him into the basement to sleep it off. We usually have about twenty guys in there on any given day before the trucks take them somewhere else. He'll probably be O.K. in a couple days."

Her face fell a little bit, then rose again. "That's O.K," she said.

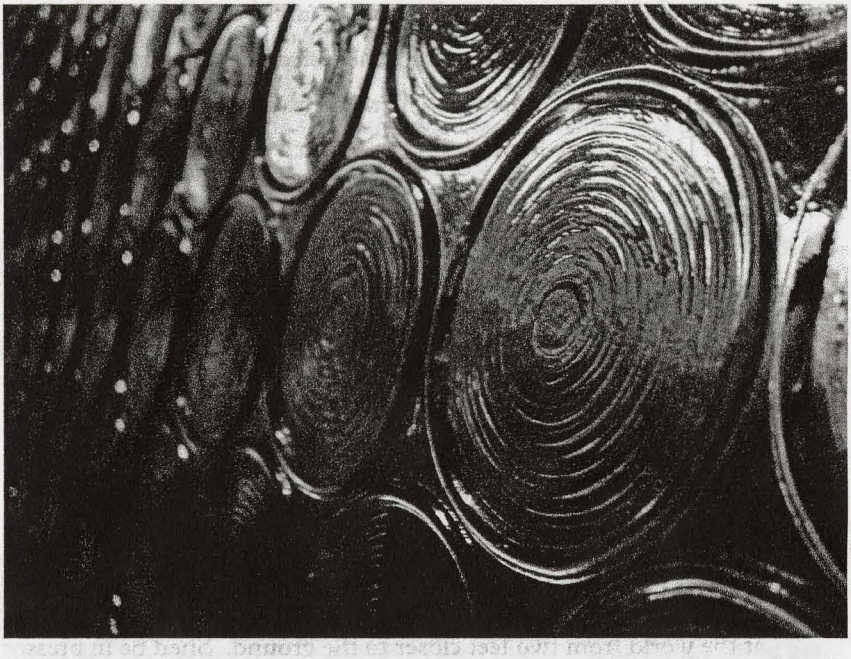
"Yeah," he agreed. "He made a mess on my floor, though. Red stuff everywhere. It made me feel a little uncomfortable at first-"

"-But you felt better about it afterward," the girl finished. They laughed, and soon everyone in the bar was laughing except for the girl with the bartender behind the bar, who squealed with amusement instead. Noticing that the bartender had disappeared, one of the other patrons started filling up drinks on the house.

"Hey, you wanna sleep with me tonight?" The therapist asked.

"Sure, just let me finish my drink," the girl told him.

"O.K."



Bottle Mosaic Emma Sovich

Sequins and Stars

Olivia Mirot

On the back of her dragon, she could rise above this small town life. She could float away on the smelted air, whispering sequined dreams to the lacy-winged beast below her. He always knew to come, somehow, when Daddy came home late, coral lipstick on his collar and half their check spent.

One night when she was sixteen, her dragon left. He raised one luminous silver eye to the choked sky and left her with a man, coal dust black and thick under his fingernails. She tied her hair in a knot and dusted her hands of sequins and stars.

♦♦♦♦♦

The way Momma looks at me sometimes, I think she wants to trade lives. Her lizard green eyes changed with my brown ones, looking at the world from two feet closer to the ground. She'd be in pressed cotton dresses; I'd be tying ribbons in her hair.

But I don't think she knows anymore what it's like, being eight years old, sharing one thin blanket between four kids. She's been grown up so long that she remembers it funny, as if being young was any better than being old. She keeps seeing dragons, but all I see are dusty stars.

♦♦♦♦♦

Venus wheeled through a dusty velvet bowl, shedding rays of perfect white reflections down on the brown-green Earth. A young woman soaked up the celestial light, treading barefoot over the coal-strewn yard, one hand held out to the stars, the other quietly resting on her swollen belly.

Her husband was in their double bed, alcohol heavy on his snores, while she watched the night sky. She kept expecting the flurry of beating wings, expecting the smell of sour, sulfurous breath in the air. Instead she felt a sharp kick and smiled, bittersweet: another stargazer, in miniature, already anxious to fly.

♦♦♦♦♦

When I was a little baby, Momma used to bounce me on her hip under the night sky and tell me stories. She would whisper about the world outside these mountains, about how much bigger things could get. I tried to see it, a whole universe, places where the ocean spread wide like a big salty blanket, and cities that shone so bright they were like stars come down to earth. She told me I'd go there on wings, to those places she'd talked about under clear, autumn skies. But I'm not sure. I can see real stars right here.

The Holiday

Wes Schantz

Lydia had a point. That is what her dad's brief hesitation told her. He looked surprised, then like he was going to get mad but had suddenly thought better of it, then he looked amused, then a little proud—all this in a moment. But then he frowned and she knew better than to push her luck. She didn't know clearly what it was, but it excited her, seeing she had this power to make him stop and appraise something she said—her dad, a grown-up. Well, that was something new.

So she couldn't resist. "But it's such a beautiful day," she repeated. Those were the very words...She sneaked a glance at him. Nothing. She tried again, a little louder. "But it's such a beautiful day." When that didn't work either, Lydia became disheartened. To distract herself, she made it into a game, saying the words over and over like she was chanting a spell, moving the emphases around, trying different accents and pitches. She croaked it like a frog; she shrieked it, taking breaths between the words; she even tried belching it, though she hadn't learned the knack of it yet. Finally she grew bored and just said that one word, softly, over and over: "Beautiful...Beautiful...Beautiful..." A word can become just a sound if you do that to it. Hmm. Another new thing. She wasn't really up for getting excited over it.

They sat in silence for a minute. Dad drummed his fingers on the dash. Lydia had her forehead pressed against the window and was making faces at the man in the car beside theirs. He was trying hard to keep a straight face and his wife kept looking at him in a puzzled way. They, like Lydia and her dad, were dressed up. Then the car ahead of theirs let off its brake lights and trundled forward a ways, and they

followed, and slowed, and stopped again, and left the man and his wife behind. Beside them now was a fat teenaged boy, who ignored her. Her jaw was getting tired anyway.

Dad spoke as she was nodding off, giving her a start:

"Do you want to listen to the radio?"

"Huh?"

"The radio." He indicated something with knobs and buttons and that was enough for Lydia. Unbuckling her seatbelt clumsily, she clambered forward and started fiddling with the radio. Dad frowned, but he didn't make her go back. He did ask her to sit in the front seat, at least, and not perched on the armrest. Bursts of static, voices and music succeeded one another furiously, alternately blaring and quiet as Lydia spun the volume control. Eventually she settled on a station playing short songs about love and other simple pleasures, all with jangling guitars and quavering harmonies.

Dad had a notion to occupy her before she could discover the air conditioning, which he had adjusted to his liking.

"Do you like this?"

She was nodding her head to the music and, with a moment's eye contact to let him know this was her response, simply kept nodding away.

"It's called country music," he said.

"Country like America?"

"Or like countryside—" he began, but she wasn't finished:

"Because we learned about America the other day. Back when there were countries America thought it was the best country of all, Andy said. Andy didn't like America, he said lots of bad things they did, but I thought it sounded pretty fun."

The crooner had come to his solo. Lydia listened intently,

then smiled when all the instruments kicked back in to carry the tune rollicking along to its finish. They must have recorded the track live: she could hear the crowd cheering all around the last notes hanging in the air.

"I did agree with him about one thing though," she continued, belligerence creeping into her voice. "He said he didn't celebrate Old Day anymore and we shouldn't either. We shouldn't, it's stupid!"

"Lydia."

"We have to get up early and dress up and eat yucky food and ride this stupid ride. I forgot how much I hated it and you tricked me and said it was fun."

"Lydia."

He flicked the radio off. She fumed, her mouth shut.

"We went over this already. Okay?"

He turned the radio on again.

"Besides, you're the one who wanted to dress up. I wasn't going to make you wear your costume."

"Don't care about the costume," she muttered.

"And this ride might be boring, but it's a good way for you to understand our past. Those people spent hours and hours doing just what we're doing. Of course, real cars ran on gas and weren't stuck on rails, but think about it: some little girl would have been just as bored as you are, sitting in traffic, but not for just one day a year. Every time they wanted to get anything they had to get in their cars and drive there. It makes you appreciate your life a lot more, doesn't it?"

She looked out the window sullenly.

"Maybe it sounds fun to drive really fast, but fast in an old car was only a couple hundred miles per hour. When we ride the train to Granny's we go twice that speed. Past the farms, remember?"

Lydia remembered.

"But they didn't really know what they were doing, our ancestors, not for a long time. They did a lot of talking. They fought each other and killed each other. To preserve their way of life. This." He gestured to the traffic all around them. "Wasting time and burning gas. It took a lot of work to fix the environment, Andy will be getting to that soon. Replanting forests, figuring out bioengineering. Again, boring but important."

Lydia made a note of that so she could impress the others. She imagined their admiring faces when she explained it to them. "Yup, boring but important," she would say.

"You said it's a beautiful day. Well, all they saw of it was the treetops over the sound-wall. And there wouldn't have been any more nice days if they hadn't finally decided to fix things.

"Think about it awhile and we'll go outside and play later."

Lydia supposed that would be all right.

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